

When God stops listening

Isaiah 58

This is Isaiah 58, one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. For starters, it is filled with biting **sarcasm** and, if you know me then you can see why I like it. **I'll tell you later** in the sermon when I heard this really for the very first time and it became my favorite.

“Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud! Don't be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins! ²Yet they act so pious! They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me. ³‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren't you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don't even notice it!’ ‘I will tell you why!’ I respond. ‘It's because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. ⁴What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. ⁵You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? ⁶‘No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. ⁷Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. ⁸‘Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. ⁹Then when you call, the Lord will answer. ‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply. ‘Remove the heavy yoke of oppression. Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors! ¹⁰Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon. ¹¹The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. ¹²Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a builder of walls and a restorer of homes. ¹³‘Keep the Sabbath day holy. Don't pursue your own interests on that day, but enjoy the Sabbath and speak of it with delight as the Lord's holy day. Honor the Sabbath in everything you do on that day, and don't follow your own desires or talk idly. ¹⁴Then the Lord will be your delight. I will give you great honor and satisfy you with the inheritance I promised to your ancestor Jacob. I, the Lord, have spoken!’ Isaiah 58

Are you picking up on the **problem? God is not responding to the prayers of the people, and they are confused.** They are fasting and keeping other religious practices so what's the problem. **Should those practices work?** That would mean that God is going to bless us when we do them. **If not, then why are we doing these things** like prayer, going to temple, and fasting. If these aren't getting **God's attention, then that isn't fair.**

This chapter describes the worst scenario of any people who want God to bless them and be with them. This chapter describes...When God stops listening

When God stops listening is when...Spiritual practices become attempts to manipulate God...

What is the primary complaint? God isn't listening **which means God is not doing what they want him to do for them.** There isn't any expected benefit to doing the prayer and fasting. Again, it isn't working the way they expect. **They expect to do religious** practices like fasting and that will **compel God to bless them in the way they see fit.** It's kind of the **rubbing the bottle demands that the Genie give you 3 wishes.** The practices are a means to an end. **I do _____ and God must then do _____.**

This is not a relationship like God wants with them where they are his people and his is their only God. **This isn't a relationship at all.** If you **had a friend** who you treated this way, they wouldn't be a friend for long. In a friendship you do things for your friend because you love him. **You want to be with your friend not just to use** him for your own advancement.

They are to obey his commands because they want to please him. They **respect him** as their king. And they do **religious stuff because it is part of being with him,** in his presence. Then when they obey his commands, and **he blesses them and uses them to bless others.**

Fasting is mentioned here, but there were other things like sacrifices in the temple, that they were probably doing and yet no response from God.

In other words, they have turned important **spiritual practices into something they were never meant to be.** They aren't about **obligating,** or **compelling** God to do what people want him to do. That's the **genie** and the 3 wishes.

When God stops listening is when...Spiritual practices become attempts to manipulate God... Rather than to praise and submit to him.

Look closely to what Isaiah is saying about these confused disappointed people. **They act like a righteous nation** that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, **pretending they want to be near me.** Isaiah 58:2b

It's like sitting down with someone **who you think likes you** only to find out they want you to be a part of a **pyramid scheme where you make money for them.**

They are selfish. It's all about them and what they want.

That's like **the little boy who was bad,** so his mom sat him on a chair. He couldn't play or watch TV or anything. He just sat there. His mom asked him **if he had learned his lesson** by being forced to sit. The little boy said, **"In my mind I'm standing up."** This is **going through the motions of submitting** to the authority of his mom, but his heart hasn't submitted. **His heart is in full out rebellion.** It will only be a **matter of time when the punishment will need to be more severe.**

And they aren't really praising him, are they? They aren't talking about **his goodness and his faithfulness.** This is doing religious stuff you think God will like, but not because you love him and want to please him, rather **because you want him to favor you.**

It also becomes clear that **not only are they not praising or worshipping God** and they **definitely haven't submitted.** They are...Doing what is religious, not what is godly.

A person can pray, skip a few meals, go to church one out of every four Sundays in a month and still not have a heart that wants to praise and serve God as their king. These don't really tell you about what is in someone's heart. **You can fake these very easily** and they really aren't that **hard to do**. That is in comparison to letting God tell you what to do **even fasting is easier**. I can do these things and **still relate to God as my genie**.

What I'm saying is that you can do these things and not be godly or in some way reflect the character or the heart of God. Look at the things they are doing that are **contrary to the character of the God** they are supposed to show to all the nations. **Mark them in your outline as I read.** "It's because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep **oppressing your workers**.⁴ What good is fasting when you keep on **fighting and quarreling**? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me.⁵ You humble yourselves by **going through the motions of penance**, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? **Now Isaiah is going to list some of God's characteristics that clearly his people aren't representing.**⁶ "No, this is the kind of fasting I want: **Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden** of those who work for you. **Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.**⁷ **Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.** Isaiah 58:3-7 **No, that last one isn't fair.** When you see that free loading cousin's **number show up on your phone** you must answer it? This is for another time.

Fasting is easy compared to making real change to obey the law of Moses and the voice of the prophet. For them fasting and going to temple was **easier than putting into practice that last list**. That is **real life change**. That **will hurt**, that will cut deep. That will **make their powerful friends angry**.

¹⁶ "And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get.¹⁷ But when you fast, comb your hair^[a] and wash your face.¹⁸ Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18

If you are doing it without the character of God, then it is empty religion and that is easy. They **liked these practices** because they were easy and they probably **made them feel good about themselves**.

Sometimes I think the American church is just happy that we can do the easy stuff that we like and call ourselves Christians. We love doing church on Sunday, that is if the worship music suits me. We are happy that we have a place to go on Sunday and do a few very easy things that make us feel better. **"Oh, pastor I really needed this today after the week I've had."** Now there's nothing wrong with that unless that was **my primary motivation for coming because I knew it would make me feel better**.

Eagle Ridge, are we just happy that Midland survived our past financial crisis and made it through COVID without going broke. Beaverton are you simply happy that you still have a church

to go to on Sundays. **Is that enough for you? That's too easy.** That's like being a kid and only eating the foods that you really like which never includes anything green.

But don't ask me to serve or give regularly or support Cultivate. And don't ask me to **open my bible regularly** or **sacrifice my time to be in relationships with other brothers and sisters because I might have to love and sacrifice for them.** So many people during COVID were so focused on whether churches met or not on Sundays but **didn't care a bit if they acted like the church Monday through Saturday.**

The people of Israel are exactly that way. They want to do Judaism, but the easy parts, the parts they like because those parts make them feel good.

You can **boil all these points down to one thing.** Yes, they wanted to **manipulate God**, they **didn't want to submit** to him. They wanted to **do the religious easy stuff** without having to do the godly stuff. **What do all those issues have in common?** Focusing on self, not God or others.

We hit this all the time because it is **the elephant in this room and every other** worship place in our country. This is making God and his church simply a **means to my end.** I am **the consumer**, and it is **incumbent on God and the church** to give me what I want to consume. **That brings us back to selfishness verses, the character that we see most vividly in Jesus.**

Again, the purpose of Israel was to be an example to all the nations about God's goodness and his power. That is the opposite of focusing on self. **Complaining because God isn't jumping when you say, "jump" is being self-absorbed.**

And what about all of those "religious" things the people of Israel were doing. **Where those are only about them, making their lives easier and better.** Or were those about God and others?

You guessed it, those are also about God and others.

What are the equivalent religious practices today? **Sunday morning attendance, quiet time or devotions, prayer, tithing or giving.** These can be used in the same unholy way as the religious practices of their time like fasting. **But what do those practices that we like have to do with being God and other focused?**

What we are talking about here is a separation between the inner life and the outer life. Here's how one of my heroes, Bill Hull, puts it. Christ exists for others. When we take on his form we begin to see the connection between the inner life and the outer life. It is inescapable. If Jesus exists for others, then his followers exist for others, and the church community exists for others. **It is in this selfless act that we can meet our own needs.** When we have changed our mode of leadership, **when we begin to minister out of satisfaction rather than want, the spirit's impulse is to affect others.** In fact, I would think anyone filled with God would burst if they couldn't. *Choose the Life*, Bill Hull, page 211.

The quickest way to ruin spiritual practices is to make them a path to get me closer to God. **That puts the focus on what I need** and where I think I need to go. That is selfishness. These are like worship, an opportunity to **create space for the holy spirit to work in our lives.**

Here's how the nation of Israel was using or misusing. (human mindset) **But they really didn't want to get close to God because they loved him, they just wanted the benefits.** This is where Bible reading, Sunday worship, small groups, prayer are not about God and preparing us to bless others, they are about us.

This is how Jesus wants us to approach spiritual practices like Sunday morning worship, groups, Bible study, communion, prayer, fasting and even PIP. Jesus mindset

The Jesus mindset makes it about God and what he wants to do in us. And **how he wants to use us** to make the kingdom present for others.

God starts listening when we start listening and acting like His People.

They weren't acting like God's people and no amount of religious stuff was going to change that. They could have fasted, danced, **barked at the moon**, gone on a complete **darkness retreat** and it wouldn't have made God any more likely to respond to their requests for help.

It's like what Bill Hull said, **we amazingly get our needs met when we make it about God and others.**

Then we become what others need! **When we listen for God's voice through the Bible, the Holy Spirit, other believers**, and his creation and do what he says then, we become what everyone in the world needs. We make the Kingdom of God present for them. **What does everyone need, and were created to need? That is a relationship with God, but they also need a way to see God and experience his goodness.** That's where we come in. **We are signs of his kingdom.** We are **examples of how God transforms people** into what they were **created to be** and gives them the rich and fulfilling life that only comes from Jesus.

Isaiah uses these images to describe how God's people then and now become what the world needs. You will be like a **well-watered garden**, like an ever-flowing spring. ¹²Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a **rebuilder of walls and a restorer of homes.**

Everyone needs water and what water nourishes. This is an image of God providing for people outside of his rule and reign by using those within. **A garden is also a picture of refreshment, peace, the garden of Eden, things being put back the way they were meant to be.**

If that isn't enough, then there is the image on one who rebuilds what has been destroyed. Again, something is put back **the way it was intended** to be, something is **made new**. This is an image that they would remember when they return and rebuild their country.

Here's where this chapter became one of my favorites. (Pic) I was standing in front of this building, the Los Angeles City Hall with a group of teenagers. I was with **The Center for Student Missions** helping lead a group of students to experience what God was doing with **the poor and marginalized** in LA.

This is one of the **most iconic buildings in LA**. It's on **tee-shirts, post cards**, magazines, billboards, TV shows...It is **beautiful, even majestic lit up** against the California sky.

The problem is that this building at that time was almost completely empty. It was a disaster inside after the North Ridge earthquake. It was unsafe other than the first couple of floors. The rest was cracked, and unsafe. Later it deteriorated even more because it became **open to the elements.**

It looked good on the outside, but it was cracked, broken, and all together a mess on the inside. **It wasn't at all what it appeared to be.** Now today after **300 million dollars** it has been restored to much of its former glory inside and out.

What the leader who told us this said is that in **our week in LA we were going to fill some cracks.** Yes, there are many and we were only there a week. **Then we read Isaiah 58** where God said he wanted me to be a **repairer of walls and a restorer of homes.** Chills ran up and down my body. **Something connected in my spirit, something important and I have never been the same.**

Isaiah also says we are to be light. One of **Isaiah's favorite** images is light. **Light provides others for the ability to see things clearly,** accurately and know where to go next.

Look at verse 10. ¹⁰Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble. **Then your light will shine out from the darkness,** and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon.

Can you see it? The light comes out of a dark place. Those who are going to be **sent into captivity can be transformed into light.** Those **living in a post Christian culture** in America where people are losing their minds and clearly wrong have become right.

"I, the Lord, have called you **to** demonstrate my righteousness. I will take you by the hand and guard you, and I will give you **to** my people, Israel, as a symbol of my covenant with them. And you will be **a light to guide the nations.** Isaiah 42:6

Who is the source of light to the nations? This is a prophecy that a man named Simeon said as he held Jesus in front of the temple in Jerusalem. He is **a light to reveal God to the nations,** and he is **the glory of your people Israel!**" Luke 2:32

He is the glory of the people of Israel. He came from them. But he is a light that will reveal God to all the nations.

Are you getting the picture? People like us **can be a garden** that refreshes and nourishes, **one who repairs** what sin has broken and **light to help people who are stumbling** through life.

Steps of Obedience

Confess selfishness in your relationship with God and His Church. Anything good starts here!

Respond to God with thanks and submission.

Here's a simple way that we teach that will help you approach any time with God any spiritual practice or just how to start your day.

1. "God how can you be so good to me?"

Start listing how God has been good to you in spite of you not deserving his favor. This gets our focus off of our favorite subject, ourselves, and on to God. **It improves our attitude and perspective.**

1. How am I doing loving those you have put around me?

This is a way of getting your mind on the people that are in your path, your circle of influence. **Then you can start immediately praying** for those people, but also you can **wait to see if God gives you an idea** of how to love that person today. Like the last question it gets our minds off our favorite subject, ourselves and on to others.

1. What are you trying to say to me today?

This is where we open our hearts up to whatever the Holy Spirit wants to move us toward. If you ask that question and **something comes into your mind capture that and obey it.** Or take a **small step** towards that.

My challenge is that you practice these questions for the next week and see what happens. But remember, **don't ruin this by putting an end goal on to it.** This is to **open space** in your heart for the transforming power of Jesus. You are giving him access. You are saying, **“Yes Lord, I want to be with you. You are my king, not my Jeanie.”**

Where is God calling you to be light, garden and a builder.

When Quinten watched friend.